

August 9, 1999

Mrs. Jennifer Byler
Co-Chairman
Virginia Standards of Learning Assessment Program Advisory Committee
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Dr. Mark Edwards
Co-Chairman
Virginia Standards of Learning Assessment Program Advisory Committee
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3820 Nine Mile Road
Richmond, Virginia 23223-0420

Dear Jennifer and Mark:

As you know, I recently appointed the initial membership of the Standards of Learning Assessment Program Advisory Committee, a responsibility delegated to me by the Virginia Board of Education. I am very pleased with the high caliber of individuals willing to serve on this important body. I am confident that they will make valuable and constructive contributions toward the continuous improvement of the Standards of Learning (SOL) assessment program and the successful implementation of meaningful educational accountability in Virginia.

While I know both of you are in the planning phase for the Committee's first organizational meeting, there are several ideas that I would like the Committee to explore as part of its initial agenda in the specific area of the History and Social Studies SOL tests. These ideas have been suggested to the Board over the past several months by various groups and individuals, especially from principals and teachers in schools across Virginia. I believe they merit further discussion and serious consideration. As such, I am respectfully requesting the Committee to advise and report to the Board, as soon as reasonably possible, on the following issues:

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1. End of Year History/Social Studies Tests Between Grades 4 and 8. Some people have expressed concern over the cumulative nature of the History/Social Studies SOL tests at the lower grade levels, especially the Grade 8 test. In crucial skills such as reading, writing and math, cumulative testing ensures that a child is performing these skills at grade level. However, in a content-oriented subject such as History and Social Studies, cumulative testing may have a varied effect on instruction methods. I would like the Committee to explore whether the Board should break down all or part of the existing History and Social Studies tests into tests at each of the grade levels; for example, administer separate History and Social Studies tests in grades 4, 6 and 7. These tests could remove any concern of cumulative content in History and Social Studies and provide more information to teachers regarding a student's strengths and weaknesses.

2. Essay Items as a Component of the History and Social Studies Tests in Middle and High School. The Board is very interested in addressing assessment procedures related to Social Studies performance that encourage a student to demonstrate an ability to analyze historical content and express himself or herself about broader historical questions and concepts. I am aware of suggestions that the use of open-ended or essay questions might be appropriate as a component of the tests in this area. This is a major step and needs to be carefully thought out, particularly with regard to how an essay component would be scored and weighted relative to the multiple-choice items. If the Committee offers positive advice on this matter, there are many ways to phase this in. Please consider also whether the essay items might be more appropriate for the middle and high school levels initially.

3. Stand-Alone World History Test. As you know, this fall the Board is implementing a stand-alone World Geography test. Should we also consider implementing stand-alone World History tests? My initial reaction is that this would provide a nice array of options for school divisions as to how to combine or separate the teaching of History and Geography at the secondary level.

4. School and Student Report Cards. Although matters regarding the School Performance Report Card and the individual student SOL test performance report cards are not directly tied into the Committee's mission, I would like to get the Committee's input on how to improve these items into the hands of the people coordinating the Board's efforts in this area. Dr. Stewart Roberson, Superintendent of Hanover County Public Schools, is in charge of a committee advising the Board on improvements to the School Report Card, and Cameron M. Harris, Assistant Superintendent for Assessment & Reporting at the Department of Education, is coordinating all improvements to the student report cards. By copy of this letter, I am asking Dr. Roberson and Ms. Harris to coordinate with you, and at an appropriate time, to determine a method to receive the Committee's recommendations on these items as Dr. Roberson and Ms. Harris proceed with their work.

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The items above require careful thought and consideration. They also have potential budgetary effect. As such, I've asked the Department of Education to prepare the appropriate budget information should the Committee and the Board act favorably on these items. Given their prominent and important roles in education issues before the General Assembly, I am certain Senator Walker and Delegate McDonnell can advise you on any time schedules if funding is required during the 2000 General Assembly session.

Finally, I respectfully request an opportunity to briefly address the Committee at its organizational meeting. Please contact me if you wish to discuss the above items. The ball is now in your court. I pledge to you my support to assist you in your important leadership roles.

With best regards, I am

Sincerely yours,

Kirk T. Schroder, President
Virginia Board of Education

KTS/mnr

cc: Members, Virginia Board of Education
Paul D. Stapleton, Superintendent of Public Instruction
Members, Virginia Standards of Learning Assessment Program Advisory Committee
Ms. Cameron M. Harris, Assistant Superintendent for Assessment & Reporting
Dr. Stewart Roberson, Superintendent of Hanover County Public Schools